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III. IN THE COLLEGE.

LIST NO. 3: QUESTIONS FOR COLLEGES.

1. How many hours of required work are there in English composition and rhetoric as distinguished from literature?

2. How many hours of elective work?

3. How often do you have written work, (*a*) prepared outside class, (*b*) done in class?

4. To what extent are theme subjects taken (*a*) from the literature studied? (*b*) from the student's daily life, observation, and experience? (*c*) from work done in other departments of the college exclusive of the English department?

5. How much time is given to the reading of themes in class? Is the reading done by the instructor or by the student?

6. Are the themes written with reference to a specific audience suggested by the instructor or chosen by the student?

7. In the early work of the course is facility or correctness made the immediate aim?

8. To what extent is the entire rewriting of themes required?

9. What amount of time per month is given by the instructor to personal conference with individual students on the written work?

10. Have you courses in which the problems of English composition are considered with reference to training students who intend to teach English in the secondary schools?

11. Along what lines do you see most need of improvement in the English teaching of your college?

12. What recommendations have you to send back to teachers of English in the preparatory schools fitting for your college?

The study of English in the colleges has, within the past decade, become increasingly satisfactory. In several of the smaller colleges, and in one of the great universities, the work has been reorganized and a more generous allowance of time given. It is noteworthy that Harvard, Columbia, and Vassar still lead in giving English in the curriculum a place commensurate with its importance, providing five hours of required work, and a large amount of elective work. It has been the misfortune of English that it has not had the status of any other full course in the hours assigned it, that it has been, and is still

in many colleges, tucked into a student's programme as an insignificant adjunct to other work. The student is apt to take his measure of the importance of a subject from the prominence given it by the faculty, and to treat as a pretty, useless frill a subject merely sandwiched in between others which demanded of him more lengthy consideration, and which, in the coin of his realm, count for more toward a degree. Some colleges have not passed the point where, as Professor Barrett Wendell has said, the English teacher, like the dancing-master, is regarded as a kind of ornamental appendage to the serious course of study.

The root of the difficulty lies in the fact that the disciplinary importance of English has not been properly recognized. So long as English is merely an adjunct, a means of saving instructors in other departments work which they should do themselves, in insisting on proper form in their written papers, so long will it be merely a side issue on the curriculum. The true function of English teaching, as I conceive it, is to teach a student to *organize* his experience and knowledge for expression. There is nothing that taxes human intelligence so severely as this very process of organization; it involves clear, precise thinking; it involves a nice perception of relations of one thing with all the other things in one's universe. English teaching in college suffers somewhat from the incubus which weighs on the secondary school even more deadeningly — the incubus of formal rhetoric. Instead of teaching our students names, classifications, an elaborate nomenclature of logical distinctions, we need to teach them a few, a very few, basic principles of thought-organization. We need principles, and the application of principles to the matter in hand, and we need this done over and over again until the principles have sunken into the subconsciousness of the student and are used by him almost automatically. If we could get into the heads of students in our college classes what unity, emphasis, and coherence mean; if we could make them see that these are organizing principles of human thought everywhere, in all the fine arts, in music, painting, sculpture, architecture; if we could make them realize that they are

fundamental wherever human intelligence seeks outward expression, we should do something for our students that would count eternally in their development. The task of the English teacher is to teach students *to think*, to think in orderly processes, to supply the student with principles for testing thought. This is not exciting work, and the student does not "take to it" as the traditional duck takes to water, but it is the business of the English teacher, by infinite variety of resources, to instil these basic principles until they are mastered. Instead of this, what we have in much of our college work, even in the Freshman class, is detailed classification of kinds of description—subjective, objective, dynamic, kinetic, intensive, and a dozen more. In narration, instead of the simple laws of development, we have the whole theory of the technique of the drama, with charts, and diagrams, and arches, and hypersubtleties of all sorts, and then, to cap the climax, we have the complete psychology of style unfolded to the freshman mind in its virgin innocence. English teachers in college try to present in the freshman year the material and results given them in their graduate work; English teachers in the secondary schools try to transplant college courses *in toto* to their new classroom; neither is content with the plain duty near at hand, but seeks self-exploitation and artificial interest by the use of matter unadapted to the needs of students. I believe, in short, that the next ten years will see a great simplification of the subject-matter of English taught in the secondary school and in college; that heads of departments will insist on the unloading in the elementary courses of about half the material that now encumbers them; that there will be a return to basic principles for testing thought, and form as it is related to thought. There is time enough to teach freshmen the art of fiction, and the technique of the drama, and the psychology of style, when they have learned that two absolutely unrelated statements may not be connected by *and* and thrust into a single sentence.

I have put stress on the necessity of teaching a few basic principles or laws of thought, because they must ever be the balance-wheel for the mass of new perceptions which it is the

highest privilege of an English instructor to evoke in his students. The English instructor should stimulate, should help awaken the imagination, should attune the senses to a finer and more delicate registering of the experience of living. It is for just such a purpose that I should recommend a great increase in the number of short themes assigned (commonly known as daily themes), for they call for an immediate, personal, vivid reaction on daily life with its crisscross and play of interests, suggestion, and feeling. Since the function of teaching English is to teach self-expression, to teach the student to organize and phrase his perception of life, he should be sent to that material which is warmest and closest, which he will unconsciously put forth with most intimate knowledge. English composition can never be vital until it trains the student to select his *own* material from that which life brings, making his selection along the line of personal interest. As soon as English can be liberated from the tyranny of set subjects taken from literature, where the object is the mechanical reproduction of the ideas of another, we shall begin to have work that is worth while. A good many of the freshmen who come to Wellesley have no idea of writing on anything but Hamlet's madness or the evils of jealousy as seen in Othello, or Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*, or friendship, with pitiful pilfering from Emerson. A subject of less magnitude is unworthy of their infant prowess; they who have been used to scaling the walls of Olympus lustily rebel at the pedestrian task of giving an account of some simple incident of the day. They are tongue-tied and helpless unless the material of ideas is taken more or less bodily from a book and given back under a thin disguise of rephrasing. And we call writing on such subjects self-expression! I do not of course mean that subjects from literature necessarily call only for the ideas of another, but wish rather to emphasize the obvious truth that in the freshman and sophomore years the student's spontaneity does not naturally play about subjects taken from literature; that therefore it is better to keep these subjects in subordination. In the later years of the course, subjects from literature have much more a rightful place, for there is, as the student

matures, a growing catholicity of taste and an aptitude for ideas as ideas ; in the earlier years, however, consistent effort should be made to keep the subjects for short and long themes humanly rather than pedagogically interesting. Professor G. R. Carpenter, of Columbia, writes :

Theme subjects are taken almost entirely from matters lying within the student's experience. We have not secured good results from making the work in literature the basis of composition. My feeling is that such a union of two different kinds of work is likely to be successful only in the junior and senior years.

Of the colleges sending information on this point, Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, the Institute of Technology, Brown, Williams, Tufts, Amherst, Vassar, and Wellesley report that theme subjects are practically all taken, in the earlier years of the course, from subjects based on the students' experience.

A recommendation to which I attach much importance is that more time be given in class to the reading and discussing themes by the instructor, and more particularly by the student. It is incredible to suppose that themes dropped into a box and read in private by an elder and returned to the student in private will have the same significance as themes which are to pass muster before a student's comrades, which are to raise or lower him in the esteem of those who constitute his world. A wise instructor cannot neglect to utilize the social instinct which makes us all eager to stand well in the eyes of our little world, which makes communication to an audience of our fellows a real and vital thing. Such class discussion will stimulate better work in the students by lifting the act of writing from a mechanical exercise to a human utterance to one's fellows. Besides that, it will be the means of testing and applying to ever-varying material the cardinal touchstones or principles of thought-organization which it is the business of the English instructor to inculcate. Statistics as to the amount of time actually given in the classroom to the reading of themes, in answer to the question sent out, have been too vague and unsatisfactory to tabulate. Some colleges report "a considerable amount of time," whatever that may mean. The statements from Harvard, Columbia,

Cornell, the Institute of Technology, Brown, Amherst, Tufts, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley, seem to indicate that from one-half to one-third of the time given to English in the classroom is devoted to comment on themes read aloud. Reports from several other colleges seem to show very little class discussion of themes. One-third is certainly a low enough time allowance for this part of the work. Our composition teaching, as I said a moment ago, is suffering from too much theory, from too little practical application to the matter in hand. No instructor can ever be sure that his students are not bandying about mere terms and empty names until they are put to the test of criticising themes. It would seem, perhaps, a fairer distribution if one-half the time in class were given to the presentation of a new body of facts, or to outlining new modes of work; if the other half were given to the discussion and testing of the results in composition. The emphasis at present falls in such a way as to lead one to suppose that we solemnly teach rhetoric as an end in itself rather than as means to composition. In no art school does the time spent on the theory preponderate, as in rhetoric teaching, over the actual practice and criticism of results. In painting and drawing, it is acknowledged that the student learns by *doing*; in English composition, it seems to be supposed that the student learns by copious advice as to how to do. In every studio where artists are learning to paint, it is admitted by common consent, that the criticism of results by the master and fellow-students is the most valuable and significant part of the training. Why should this not be true in the art of English composition?

It will not seem extravagant to suggest that almost one-half the time in the English class be given to the reading and discussion of themes, if it is borne in mind that another important end is thereby achieved. It is very evident from college freshmen that they have not been trained to rewrite themes in the sense of reconceiving, in a new and larger spirit, the matter presented. They will recopy themes, correcting specific mistakes indicated, but they seem curiously fettered by the finality of the written word in making radical and complete changes. The discussion of themes in class, if wisely conducted, will throw

new points of view on the matter as well as the form ; will enable the student to re-envisage his material, will send him away eager to reconstitute it in the larger, more pregnant relations which the discussion has revealed. It is because of this profound conviction that the class discussion of themes is the best means of teaching rhetorical principles, the best means of training taste and critical acumen, the only means of stimulating students to an intelligent reconceiving and reshaping of material, that the claim for half the time in the English hour is made for it. Reports from several of the leading colleges indicate that from sixty to seventy-five per cent. of the themes are entirely rewritten. In the last two years of the high school, and throughout the college course, the average student should be taught to expect to rewrite about half his work. The criticism that fails to make pressingly evident the need of the total reconstruction of a theme must fall short somewhere or rest content with comfortably mediocre attainment. In my own advanced elective work, I count practically on every long theme being rewritten. As a student advances in his work, the infinite possibilities of betterment in his writing should make constant and eager challenge to him.

The colleges themselves proclaim, as one of their greatest needs, more time set apart by the English instructor for personal conference with his students. In the high school, the need is more importunate, though on the whole there is far less provision for it than in the colleges. Most of the colleges of first rank follow the practice of Harvard in arranging that an instructor shall have conferences with each individual student in his written work at least once a fortnight. It is suggested by the head of one of the leading English departments that a fair allowance of time is to assign each college instructor six or eight hours a week of conference with students for every two hours of class appointment. Probably the best and most valuable work of the English instructor is done in talking over the themes of a student in personal conference. A single searching question can set straight in a moment some point of defective analysis ; the inflection of the voice can reveal a whole new point

of view as no set of written symbols can. It is to be earnestly hoped that the colleges will make more generous provision for this part of the English work.

The general recommendation made to the colleges, namely: (1) that there should be emancipation from so many set subjects drawn from literature, and should be more themes based on daily life and observation; (2) that there should be increase in the time given to the reading and discussion of themes to the extent of making this one-half, or at least one-third, of the whole time in class; (3) that there should be a great increase in the requirement of rewritten work; (4) that there should be set apart for the English instruction, as a necessary part of the work, as necessary as the laboratory to the instructor in science, five or eight hours a week for conference with individual students on their work—these recommendations, I say, should be passed on to the secondary schools too. If they were carried out in the secondary schools, the need for them in college would be far less. The college must now supply in part the deficiency in secondary-school teaching. There are some specific pieces of work crying aloud to heaven to be done in the secondary school. For instance, there is no reason whatever why, in a class of 175 freshmen, only about twenty-five should know how to write and punctuate the headings of an ordinary letter. Freshmen are amazingly and grotesquely ignorant of the simplest rules. They will, in writing a note to a college instructor to explain a late theme, address the instructor as “Kind Friend,” with no sense that there is anything provincial in such a salutation. Is it not a clear injustice to the great mass of students who never get beyond the high schools to send them forth into the world without knowledge of the most practical points in English that they are called upon to use in the business of life? Letter forms and punctuation have to be done year after year with successive freshman classes in colleges, though both should have been disposed of in the grammar school. But the plea for teaching punctuation and letter forms becomes a faint echo before the clamor that English grammar be more efficiently handled in the secondary schools. The colleges with unvarying

insistence repeat that a more intelligent grasp of the elements of English grammar is most desired of the entering freshmen. I quote from a few letters sent in answer to the question, "What recommendations have you to send back to teachers of English in the preparatory schools fitting for your college?" From Mr. Seaver, of the Institute of Technology, comes the answer :

More explicit instruction in grammar. The commonest violations of mere correctness I encounter are grammatical errors, due chiefly, I think, to hazy ideas about grammar in general. For instance, 50 per cent. of my pupils insist that in such a sentence as "There were three men," *there* is the subject of *were*; and if you ask them what part of speech *there* is, they ask you what you mean by part of speech.

Another correspondent writes :

The pupils may remember the dates of Longfellow's birth and death; they are confident that they once studied a book on rhetoric that had something in it about figures of speech, that they have read the *Merchant of Venice* and the *Lady of the Lake* and some other books — they are not sure what. But they can't tell a sentence from an adverbial clause; they begin each sentence upon a new line; their idea of unity resembles the spokes of a cart-wheel. I recommend that the preparatory-school teachers of English burn up the text-books *about* literature and devote the little time at their disposal to a more thorough study of the books *of* literature; that they spend less time on text-books of rhetoric and more on practice in composition; and that, if they are eligible, they take at the first opportunity the Harvard Summer School course entitled English A.

Professor Ganung of Amherst says :

There ought to be more drill in simple English grammar, and a more vital, less exclusively mechanical, approach to the work of composition.

Professor Maxcey of Williams College reinforces the thought in this statement :

The pupils should give more attention to the principles of grammar and less to the critical side of literature. The boys who come up to college are in the great majority of cases lamentably deficient in the simplest principles of grammar, while they can give all sorts of information about simile and metaphor. It is of more importance to be able to write intelligently "It is he" instead of "It is him," and give a rational explanation why one is preferable to the other, than to know the difference between metonymy and synecdoche, or to know the difference between folio and quarto editions of Shakespeare. I refrain from giving you instances of the wholesale ignorance regarding grammatical principles and the essentials of sentence structure as

illustrated by incoming freshmen, for you would have no confidence in my veracity.

Professor Damon of Brown urges that the preparatory schools —

spend less time on things the college is supposed to teach, and more time on elementary matters, that we may not receive, duly equipped with a certificate, students whose grammar is wholly individual, and who are unable to maintain in writing the degree of coherence expected of a man of average intelligence in casual conversation.

Professor Hart of Cornell strikes at the root of our difficulty in his recommendation :

The sorest need is the compelling of good English in other departments; *e. g.*, in languages, history, descriptive science. As long as other departments are content to accept poor writing, they will get it. . . . Our Cornell experience is that the most difficult thing to overcome is the lack of thought. Many of our freshmen seem to believe that anything patched up in grammatical shape will pass for writing. Our chief effort goes to training them to think. Consequently I would urge school teachers to train their scholars to *think*; especially to prepare outlines of composition, before writing the compositions.

Time forbids quoting from the many other interesting communications on this point. The gist of them may perhaps be expressed in the view that the preparatory schools should put far heavier stress on teaching sentence structure, unity as applied to the sentence, and the use of connectives; that they should send up students who actually know the essentials of a paragraph, and know a good paragraph from a bad one; who can trace the logical development of an idea as formulated in a topic sentence through a paragraph, or through a group of paragraphs; who can draw up sensible outlines of their themes as a guide *before* writing; who can detect manifest incoherence in thought or form. The schools have, within the past ten years, done a splendid work in sending up students increasingly well trained; this is our best augury for the future.

SOPHIE CHANTAL HART.

WELLESLEY COLLEGE.